

Counting Down to Disney (Part 1): What You Must Get Done

by Nicole Courson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Congratulations…you're going to Walt Disney World!

Whether you are celebrating your college graduation or planning the vacation of a lifetime with your kids and parents alike, this is a big deal and planning is key. It may seem as if once the hotel is booked and the tickets are purchased, the work is over, right? What can be left but packing a suitcase and boarding the plane?

Wrong!

There's so much to do! For the sake of keeping it straight, planning for Disney in our house can be divided into two basic categories: **Must Get Done Stuff** and Fun Stuff. With a little bit of looking at your calendar and some imagination, you might be able to check off more than one item on your "to-do" list at a time.

First, we'll cover the "**Must Get Dones.**" These are the basics.

* **Pick your plan.** Your PassPorter will give a much more detailed and informative descriptions of this process, but basically you need to decide what you'd like to include on your trip. Want to pay for your meals ahead of time? Check out Disney's Dining Plans, with everything from a value-priced Quick-Service plan to the foodie's dream, Deluxe Dining. Or if you're planning to visit the water parks more than once, add it onto your ticket -- you'll save money and time. Do you see yourself doing a park each day, or jumping from one to the other? The Park Hopper Option is something to think about.

* **Book your trip.** Whether you use a travel agent or book directly with Disney, be sure to be informed and clear about which resort you've chosen, the exact dates and how many rooms/guests there are. Also, be very clear with them about any special needs or preferences, such as proximity to pool, room with a view of the lake, etc.

* **Make meal reservations.** Whether you go with the Disney Dining Plan or not, you'll have to have advance dining reservations for all the sit-down restaurants on resort/park grounds. Don't make the mistake of thinking you'll just eat wherever -- you really need to plan this. Believe it or not, Advanced Dining Reservations (ADR) are available 180 days out from your trip's start date. And if you'd like to book seats at Cinderella's Royal Table, you'd better do just that -- those seats go fast!

* **Make event reservations.** Pretty much everything at Walt Disney World that's "extra-recreational" takes a reservation or ticket. If you're planning on attending Mickey's Christmas or Halloween celebrations, tickets will go on sale between six and three months away from your arrival date. Want to go parasailing around one of the lakes, see a Cirque du Soleil extravaganza over at Downtown Disney, or learn to surf at Blizzard Beach? Be sure to make reservations early.

* **Make travel plans.** Start perusing the airline deals well ahead of when you want to buy them -- this gives you a chance to know when the best is time to get the lower prices for your airfare. Some airlines might run weekly specials and others might give you better rates for leaving on a Tuesday night rather than Wednesday morning. Once you've found the perfect flight, be sure to call back and tell Disney when you're arriving -- every Disney resort guest receives complimentary Disney's Magical Express transportation to and from their hotel, and while it's a big hit for convenience and "fun" factors, it'll save you a bundle, too.

* **Start a "to pack" list.** Again, your PassPorter will be much more helpful with this, but the basics can be covered with my list of the four Ws: Who, Where, When and Weather. Just because it's Florida doesn't mean you won't need a parka in December -- I can tell you that from experience and a serious dent in my parents' travel budget! Be sure to pack for daytime play and comfort, for those nicer restaurants in the evening, for chilly evenings on Main Street watching Wishes as well as early morning jaunts to the water parks. And make a second list of things like sunscreen, baby powder (chafing), extra batteries for the camera, ponchos (yes, it does rain in the happiest place on earth and the same ponchos at the dollar store here will cost you at least \$5 there).

* **Finalize your budget.** No doubt you've been over it with a fine tooth comb a hundred times by now, but it can't hurt to revisit it. Remember the incidentals: tips ARE NOT included in meal plans, souvenirs for the kids (or the adults!) should be allotted for, and tipping your housekeeper (or mousekeeper) is recommended.

* **Finalize your tour plan.** Do not attempt to bamboozle your way willy-nilly through the parks with kids from sunup to sundown! It's not fun for anyone. Use your dining reservations to plan which days to visit which parks (if you didn't do it the other way around already). Be sure to plan downtime because everyone needs it. Whether it's lying around the pool mid-afternoon or going back to the resort early to let little ones play in the arcade while adults have a drink in the cantina, downtime in Walt Disney World is a must!

* **Charge up your essentials.** Two-way radios and cell phones are wonderful for keeping in contact when touring the parks, and those pesky handheld games your kids love can actually be handy when you're waiting in line for Space Mountain ... again! Got your camera, camcorder, MP3? Be sure to pack the chargers, too; all those necessities

are nothing but paperweights after day two if you don't!

* **Lastly -- relax!** The minute you cross under the Walt Disney World sign, blast the radio or cheer with the little ones in the backseat because this is it -- you're finally there! Exhale and embrace every minute of it. Now check out the the "[Fun Stuff](#)" [article](#), with things you can do to help you count down the days until your Disney trip.

About The Author: Nicole Courson lives in the magical kingdom of Pittsburgh, PA, with her two growing Mouseketeers and Prince Charming. They're planning their next trip to Walt Disney World in December of 2010 -- this time, with Mike's family.

Article last updated: 2/25/2011

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<http://www.passporter.com/articles/counting-down-to-disney-part-1.html>

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